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Board Insists on Relocating Seven Locks School

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Montgomery County school officials said yesterday that their plan to replace Seven Locks Elementary School with a new building on Kendale Road remains the best option to ease overcrowding in the Potomac area — throwing an already contentious debate into further turmoil.

Superintendent Jerry D. Weast said that a draft report from a joint committee of the County Council and public school system formed in March showed that the school system's original plan — to build a new school on Kendale Road, 1½ miles from the existing school — is the best alternative.

Only one other option, Weast said, would save more money — closing Seven Locks and sending the students to four other area schools.

"The report confirms my original recommendation that the Kendale replacement school is the best option," Weast told school board members. "It saves time and it saves money."

The pronouncement drew immediate and angry reaction from community members who favor construction of a replacement school at the current Seven Locks site. That position was buoyed by a

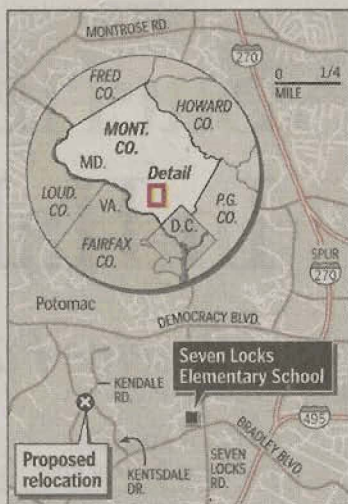
report released by the county's inspector general in February that criticized the process the school system had followed in reaching its conclusion to move to Kendale Road and suggested that a replacement school on the Seven Locks site would be more cost-effective.

"I'm stunned," said Harlivleen Gill, president of the Seven Locks PTA. "I'm completely stunned because my PTA has firmly rejected the Kendale option. We want to keep Seven Locks where Seven Locks is."

Added Sandy Vogelgesang, a member of the board of directors of the West Bradley Citizens Association: "It just blows our mind that they would be so politically insensitive."

The school system had spent \$750,000 on design plans for the Kendale Road site. But in February, the inspector general released an audit report that questioned how school officials reached the conclusion that Kendale was the cheapest and best option. As a result, planning for the new school was put on hold while County Council members and school officials attempted to work through the issue. Many now are questioning why options that were already rejected are back on the table.

At two public hearings in March, none of the more than 60



BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELSO — THE WASHINGTON POST

people who testified were in favor of replacing Seven Locks with a new school on Kendale Road. And earlier that month, County Council President George Leventhal told Weast and school board President Charles Haughey that there were not enough votes on the council to support the plan.

School board members voted yesterday to hold a public hearing May 1 before making their final decision May 9.

Though the joint report offered several options for addressing the Seven Locks issue, school board members voted yesterday to seek

comment on only two — the Kendale replacement or the closure of Seven Locks and reassignment of its students.

Leventhal said the council's position on Seven Locks remains the same.

"Given the total lack of community support for Kendale and the full range of problems with the Kendale site, the council will not support a Kendale solution," he said. "I believe there are also not sufficient votes on the council to approve the closure of Seven Locks Elementary School and the dispersal of all its students to other schools."

Weast said that if the school system moves forward with plans to build on the Kendale Road site, the new school could be in place by December 2007. In addition to providing more space for Seven Locks students, it would ease crowding at nearby Potomac Elementary.

School system officials maintain that they have the authority to decide where schools should be built. However, because the County Council controls the budget, the council could simply choose not to fund the project. On May 4, the council's education committee is slated to take up the school system's request for \$3.3 million to pay for construction at the Kendale Road site.